

Prince of Thieves, Thief of Princes by **Luddleston**

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Summary:

(Well, not technically princes.)

It started with the slow, steady creak of the window in the hall outside his bedroom sliding open.

A thief breaks into the Shirogane household, and is apprehended by Lord Shirogane's son, who happens to find said thief's eyes lovely and his arguments as to why Takashi should let him go very convincing.

Takashi then discovers that once you begin to help your rebel lover steal from nobility to help save desperate townspeople, things tend to go a bit sideways.

1. Chapter 1

Author's Note:

Uhhh i p much watched that new robin hood movie and thought it would be better if it was gay and also maybe no so deeply catholic. SO.

This is just part 1, so look forward to Matt wearing a dress to sneak into a fancy party and then Shiro taking Matt OUT of said dress in some random convenient corner at the fancy party.

Also thanks to @giraffvinu for the title suggestion!!

It started with the slow, steady creak of the window in the hall outside his bedroom sliding open.

The noise wouldn't have woken most, but Shiro hadn't been asleep in the first place, late though the hour may have been. He sat up slowly, staring at his closed bedroom door, knowing that no servant would be opening the window for fresh air at this time of night. The evening chill had set in, and if one went around opening windows in this weather, one would certainly catch cold.

Shiro listened, standing and stepping across his room slowly, soundlessly. He hear no footsteps outside his door, and so the intruder was either much lighter-footed than anyone who lived in the keep, or else a ghost. Shiro always knew this place was haunted.

He turned the doorknob, the hinges well-oiled enough that it did not creak like the window. Shiro leaned around the doorframe to observe the man walking down the hall, away from Shiro's bedroom, creeping along among the shadows close to the wall, a simple wooden bow in one hand and a quiver of arrows on his hip. His hair was kept long, tied back away from his face, spilling over the back of a hooded cloak tied about his shoulders. He was dressed entirely in black, except for his tanned leather boots, laced up to his knees, the soles soft enough to keep his footsteps inaudible.

Shiro knew at once who he was.

He followed the man into the hall, utterly unequipped to deal with a thief, as he was currently in his nightclothes. But he did have the element of surprise, along with years of combat training and a significant physical advantage—the thief was shorter and slighter than he, although most people were smaller than Shiro.

The thief crept around another corner, headed toward the keep's treasury, of course, and Shiro knew they were coming up on a narrow downwards staircase that would be the perfect place for an unsuspecting intruder to find himself cornered without enough room to draw his bow.

As soon as the thief entered the staircase, Shiro broke into a sprint, reaching him in three strides, pinning him against the stone wall. His head smacked against it hard, and Shiro winced as he forced a hand over the intruder's mouth, his elbow pinning the thief's shoulder, his opposite hand grasping a wrist to prevent a struggle.

The man seemed to know when he was beaten, a quality that Shiro appreciated, because he really did not want to have to injure him further. He stood stock-still in Shiro's grip, though his eyes burned, dark brows lowering, like he'd be spitting curses if he had the use of his mouth.

"I know who you are," Shiro said, his voice barely above a whisper. "You're the rebel thief."

His eyes rolled, like it was obvious from the breaking and entering, and then he did struggle, all at once heaving his weight against Shiro's, with a surprising amount of power for someone so slight. It took all of Shiro's strength to grapple him back into submission, both hands twisting around the thief's wrists, shoving him against the wall with his whole body. Shiro felt a dagger strapped to the man's thigh where it pressed against his own, and he tightened his grip.

"What are you planning to do with me?" the thief asked, trying to kick at Shiro's ankles, finding his leg pinned by Shiro's knee. "Are you going to

dump me into your prison? I'll just escape again. You won't kill me—not when the King wants me alive."

He was correct. His father had spoken to the commanders of the keep just that morning, warning them and his son that they would likely be on the list of the thief's next targets. Their vault's guard had been doubled, as had the guards at the gates to the keep. Shiro had a suspicion their visitor had not come through the gates. If found, the rebel was to be kept in a cell until a rider was able to fetch someone from the King's guard to collect him, and to deliver the reward promised for the capture of the man who had been robbing the border lords blind and dropping their coin in the streets for whatever rabble was lucky enough to find it.

At least, that had been the way Lord Shirogane had told it.

"I..." and here, Shiro hesitated, one second too long, the pressure in his fingers lifting just enough for the thief to wrench his fingers free and shove Shiro against the opposite wall, a dagger at his throat before he could so much as cry out.

"Don't speak," a low voice ordered him. The thief had a cloth half-mask tied around his face from the nose down. Shiro could see it move as he spoke. Only the man's eyes were visible, and they were so brilliant in the dark, Shiro would be afraid to look upon them in daylight. "I assume you are the lord's son?"

He nodded silently, as he was concerned he'd find that knife halfway through his windpipe if he said anything aloud.

"I have two options for you." The knife was so close, Shiro could swear he felt its sharp edge as he swallowed. "One: you return to your room and tell no one that I was here, and I let you live. Two: you try to send a guard running after me, and you find an arrow in your back and in his."

"C..can I...?" He let himself let out the smallest breath of relief when he didn't immediately find himself eviscerated. And then, he noticed something he would not have expected. For just a moment, the thief did

exactly what had gotten Shiro into this predicament: he hesitated. And Shiro wondered if he could make him do it again.

"What? Oh. Yes, talk."

"I'm not going to simply let you wander off to steal everything my family owns," Shiro said.

"I'm not going to do that, Christ." The knife slipped a bare half-inch away from Shiro's neck. "I'm not headed to the treasury. I'm going to the storehouses and the kitchens. Weather's gotten bad all of a sudden—people's crops are dying."

"Surely my father will help—"

"Has he ever?" His stare was cold, eyes narrowed, asking Shiro to recall whether his father had done anything to help the townspeople during the past two hard winters they'd suffered. Shiro knew he hadn't, not until there was threat of revolt on their hands. His father was not an evil man, no, but he cared for himself and his own family above his subjects.

Shiro reached up to snatch the thief's wrist, but instead of shoving him back into the opposite wall like he'd planned, he just stepped out of range of the dagger and said, "you're going the wrong way, then. Here. I'll show you."

The moment he put his back to the thief, something changed. And Shiro couldn't even begin to say what it was.

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The next morning, Shiro woke to find the keep in uproar, because of the note pinned to the storehouse door with an arrow. *Thank you for your contribution*, it read, in a messy scrawl. The thief had written it out just before he left, having ferried a portion of grain and dried fruits and simple foods enough to feed the entire village out through the back doors to his associates waiting just outside the walls of the keep. He had done so with Shiro's help. Shiro had been the one to hold the note in place on the door while the thief struck it through with the arrow.

In that moment, he hadn't been at all concerned that the arrow would land in his hand instead of the parchment, but looking at it in the morning light, he thought perhaps he should have been.

Moments after Shiro arrived at the storehouse doors, his father swept into the room, furious, his black cloak swirling behind him, a few of his guards anxiously hurrying behind, neither of them able to keep pace with Lord Shirogane's long, purposeful stride. He tore the note from the splintered door where no one else had dared touch it, eyeing it barely long enough to read the words printed there before casting it to the ground, crushing it beneath the toe of his boot.

"We will not allow him to get away with this," Lord Shirogane said, his voice loud enough to fill the room, but steady, not shouting. "Men like this, who steal in darkness rather than constructively working to serve their community, will not be tolerated in this city."

Shiro wanted to ask his father why he didn't simply give the provisions to the people himself, but he knew enough to bite his tongue. Too much protest could connect him with the thief. No one could find out that Shiro had met him—had helped him, the night before.

Lord Shirogane turned to the head of his guard, standing just behind his right shoulder. "Set your men on a constant watch here, and at the treasury. Double the guard at the gate. We will find this miscreant, and we will be rid of him. King Zarkon no longer cares whether the rebel arrives at his palace alive and in custody or dead and in pieces. Do whatever you must."

The guards immediately marched from the room, off to obey their orders, and the servants scattered, returning to their tasks. Only Shiro and his father were left standing before the door, his father snapping the arrow in half, leaving only the head of it buried in the wood, where it would be unable to retrieve without damaging the door further.

"They say this thief is the son of one of the border lords of Altea, come to destroy our kingdom from within." Lord Shirogane dropped the arrow to join the smashed and dirtied note on the floor. "But some believe he is of Daibazaal, betraying his own kingdom. Either way, he is but one man, and

whatever meager following he has gathered will crumble away once we get rid of their leader."

"Surely you would not sentence a man to death immediately," Shiro said. His father was known for being one of the most tolerant of King Zarkon's lords, a fair ruler, and Shiro had always taken pride in this.

"This is not an ordinary criminal. He is either an insurgent or a traitor, and in either case, we will see him hanged before long."

The arrow snapped again as Lord Shirogane's boot came down on it, punctuation to his lecture as he left in the direction of his office. Shiro was left with no reply but for a determination to make sure they never caught the thief.

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Shiro woke a few nights later to a cold breeze coming in through his bedroom window.

Ordinarily, he would have just pulled the blankets tighter around himself and fallen back asleep, but he'd been disturbed enough that his eyes opened and he rolled over, only to see a figure dressed in black dropping from the windowsill into his dark bedroom.

Shiro sat bolt upright, fear coursing through him even though he'd never had reason to fear assassins as the nobility living closer to the palace did. As he moved, the figure startled backwards as well, pressing against the wall with a clatter as their shoulder connected with Shiro's bookshelf.

Shiro opened his mouth, lungs filling with air, about to shout for the guard and then leap into action, but the figure stepped closer, moonlight from the opened window passing over outstretched hands, held up as if to placate Shiro, and a familiar man's face. The rebel thief.

The breath rushed out of him, hanging uselessly, soundlessly, in the air. "Oh. You're back," Shiro said. He was concerned with himself for being so relieved to see a man who had put a knife to his throat last they met.

"Yes, well, I didn't think you'd wake up," he said, and Shiro realized that in one of his hands, he had a folded piece of paper.

"Why are you here?" he asked, shifting, levering himself up. His feet were cold even with the rug laid across the floor of the room. He crossed his arms over his chest and tried not to look like he was about to start shivering.

A sigh, and the thief tossed his head, looking exasperated with Shiro. "I thought you would be asleep," he said. "But you don't sleep well, do you?"

"Not usually," Shiro admitted.

"I was going to leave this," he said, gesturing to the paper in his hand, "but it's much less debonair and secretive if you see me lay it on your pillow, isn't it?"

Shiro frowned. "Why exactly would you be leaving notes on my pillow?"

The thief extended the note in question to him, and Shiro unfolded it. In handwriting he recognized only because of its sloppiness, it read: *Until we meet again. —Matthew.*

"That's your name?"

"I know yours, Takashi Shirogane, I figured it was only fair."

Shiro took a step closer to him. "And why 'until we meet again'?"

The thief—Matthew—didn't shy away from him this time. Instead, he smiled, reaching out, resting a hand on Shiro's shoulder. The action was audacious for someone who had just broken into Shiro's home for the second time that week. "Because I'm not going to let a man like you get away," he said. "Few men would learn what I was doing and agree to help me. And it doesn't hurt that you're, well. Irresistibly gorgeous."

Shiro was glad that this interaction happened to take place under the cover of night, because he found himself flushed and red-faced at the compliment. "Oh. Well. I'm glad you decided to return, if I am honest. You're... you intrigue me."

"Do I?" This time, Matthew was the one who stepped closer. He was nearly chest-to-chest with Shiro. Matthew was shorter, but he carried himself like Shiro's stature was not something he found imposing. "Then I was right to return here. I find you intriguing as well."

"You—Matthew, you cannot return again," Shiro said, the words painful like thorns in his mouth, because *something* was blooming between them, something he hadn't felt in years, and if he had met Matthew under other circumstances... "My father wants you hanged."

"I welcome the challenge," Matthew said.

"Do you welcome death at the end of a noose?" Shiro asked, incredulous, because Matthew was not deterred in the slightest.

"Oh, my dear, I'm not *that* easy to catch. It is a risk, certainly, but a man like you is worth it. May I return tomorrow night?" The hand resting on Shiro's shoulder smoothed up his neck, becoming more proprietary, more seductive.

Shiro was helpless to tell him no.

"Please do," he said, and he leaned in, his eyes falling shut as the thief pressed a kiss to his mouth. It lasted only a moment, but Shiro savored it like a fine wine, and by the time he opened his eyes again, his room was empty, Matthew peering at him from the windowsill.

He left Shiro standing there alone, with a soft smile on his face and his fingers pressed against his mouth as though he could keep the kiss from fading.

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The day Shiro spent waiting for Matthew to return to his bedroom window felt like the longest he'd ever lived. He thought nothing would surpass the torture of his school exams, but no, it turned out, waiting for a mysterious man to pry his window open and break into his bedroom was agonizing.

He begun to wonder if he'd overdone it with the flowers, but the thought came too late, because the candles closest to the window sputtered as the cold air blew over them and a familiar someone stepped into the room.

"The candlelight is a nice touch," Matthew said, stepping out of the relative shadow of the back corner of the room. Shiro suddenly realized it was the first time he'd seen him in the light. He had known before that Matthew was handsome—one could see this even in the darkness of a staircase at midnight—but he had severely underestimated exactly *how* attractive Matthew was.

In the warm light filling Shiro's room that night, Matthew's eyes were golden and the messy hair falling in his face and over his ears looked softer to the touch than Shiro's favorite fur-lined gloves. As a wry smile stretched over his face when he observed whatever dumbstruck expression Shiro was making, Shiro noticed a scar across Matthew's cheek.

"Come with me," he said, leading Matthew to the place where the majority of the candles were located, lighting up the alcove that contained Shiro's bookshelf, a somewhat cluttered desk, and a couch that was barely large enough to admit two people. This was where he led Matthew to sit, having not forethought the fact that they would be pressed so close together.

The bottle of wine sat next to a pair of crystal glasses on the table beside them, along with a bouquet of the last of autumn's flowers, which Shiro had only barely managed to ask the gardeners for without stuttering.

"You know how to treat a man right," Matthew said, as Shiro poured him a glass of wine. Matthew's knee was pressed against his, and, once Shiro was no longer holding the bottle and therefore no longer in danger of dropping it, Matthew slung his legs over Shiro's lap, settling comfortably against him in a way that made Shiro decidedly uncomfortable, because his heart had begun to beat at a pace that it normally only reached when he was running.

"I... ah. I'm not quite certain I do know," he said. Matthew looked perfectly comfortable in his lap, casually sipping his wine and watching Shiro over the rim of the glass.

"You're doing alright regardless," he said. "Have you really never entertained a potential lover before, Sir Shirogane?"

Shiro startled, both at the question and the use of his full title, and only when Matthew chuckled at him did he realize that he was teasing him. "It's, uh, it's Shiro," he said. "Those I am closest to just call me Shiro."

"And you'd count me among them?" Matthew raised one eyebrow. His lips were stained red from the wine already.

"I think there must be some sort of bond that forms when you pin somebody to a wall and then decide to help him steal from your own keep," Shiro said.

Matthew nodded in agreement and poured another glass of wine for Shiro. "You still haven't answered my other question," he said. "Have you truly never brought another man home?"

Shiro thought for a moment, and sighed. "Well, of course, my father wants me to marry a woman, as I am his only child, and he wants me to ensure that there is an heir to the keep."

"That doesn't mean no."

"It doesn't," Shiro agreed. "Well, I suppose I've never brought another man home, but... I went away to study at an academy in the heart of Daibazaal when I was younger. There was... there was someone. But we lost touch once we graduated and both returned to separate border towns. I haven't seen him since, but he's probably married off by now."

Matthew hummed, his fingers tracing along Shiro's cheek, something wistful in his eyes. "Oh, the things we do in our misguided youth," he said.

It made Shiro smile, because Matthew could not have been older than he. "You sound like you're my father's age," he said.

"Nearly being captured and hanged so much does shave years off one's life," Matthew said.

Shiro set his glass down and leaned in closer. "I thought you weren't ever going to be captured," he said.

"Oh, I won't. But that doesn't mean there have been no close scrapes."

"I'd like to... well, I'd like to ensure that you're not nearly killed again," Shiro said taking the hand that Matthew still had resting on his cheek. "My father may find himself opposed to what you do, but I believe that our people will not survive if my father continues to hoard resources like this."

"It seems you might have a little rebellion in you after all." His free hand pulled Shiro the rest of the short distance between them.

And then, when Shiro whispered, "perhaps I do," the words fell against Matthew's lips.

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Matthew returned to spend time with Shiro between his excursions to other relieve other border lords of their bountiful wealth to keep the townspeople fed. Word of his exploits was spreading, and Shiro was subjected to furious ranting about the rebel thief at least once a day, whenever his father saw fit to complain. Shiro knew that the other border lords were much harsher on their people than his father, and Matthew took much larger sums from them in consequence. Shiro found it fair of him, but his father was offended as though anything taken from a Lord of Daibazaal was his own property stolen.

During these lectures, Shiro had to bite his tongue, had to remind himself that it did not matter what his father thought of Matthew, because his soldiers had been ineffectual at catching the thief so far, even though Matthew was sneaking into Shiro's bedroom window a handful of nights every week.

Shiro learned more about him as they spent time together, talking, eating—Shiro realized that Matthew kept very little of what he stole for himself and never remembered to eat enough, so he always snuck some leftovers from dinner to his room on nights Matthew planned to visit.

Matthew had family over the border, in the kingdom of Altea. He did not give Shiro his family name, and Shiro did not ask. There were some things Matthew had to keep secret, even from Shiro, for if Shiro knew them, he would find himself in danger for that knowledge. Matthew lived in the forest that was just out Shiro's bedroom window. He had a house, or at least some kind of dwelling, and though he claimed it was a cave, Shiro was imagining a small log cabin. After all, caves didn't have fireplaces.

Matthew also had a team of people he worked with in order to redistribute the stolen assets and to help him perform his heists. It was a small group, but they were extremely effective regardless. The only one anybody knew was Matthew, and even then, his face and name would be unrecognizable to any of the city guard. The people who knew who he was were the ones who were best motivated to keep his secrets—the peasants, the ones he'd helped with his actions.

Shiro was treated to a lecture on one particular day when his father was feeling especially self-righteous, about how the thief was defying not only the laws of the land, but of God, but Shiro knew that there were more people surviving the winter because of Matthew, and he thought that couldn't possibly go against God's law. He'd never found himself very interested in religion, anyways, so what did he know.

As it got colder, Matthew arrived wearing more and more layers, his shaggy hair untied and flowing around his face as an extra layer of insulation against the winter's chill. He had been freezing regardless, his fingers ice cold against Shiro's skin and his nose matching.

"Take it," Shiro had told him, offering him a fur cloak that he no longer wore. *"I can't have you freezing to death out there."*

Matthew just gave him another of those crooked smiles and told him he was sure Shiro could warm him up.

Shiro did his best to acquiesce.

And so their relationship had become increasingly... *physical*, since then.

One night, Shiro lay back on his bed with Matthew resting comfortably on top of him, his mouth occupied with Shiro's mouth and his hands occupied with the rest of Shiro's body. The sound of Matt's soft breaths mixing with his own was not enough to drown out the muffled sound of shouting below them.

"Is the manhunt starting?" Matthew asked, because both of them knew Lord Shirogane was organizing a party of soldiers from many of the surrounding towns that had been stolen from, in order to find the thief. They were searching every inn, every hovel, and they would come up empty, because their target was in the keep, instead, and his fingers were currently undoing the laces on Shiro's shirt.

"Sounds that way," Shiro agreed. The shouting was mostly from his father—Shiro had recently become used to that particular cadence. There were responding shouts and cheers from the soldiers assembled, louder, because it was a group of twenty strong, and the main hall where they met was directly below Shiro's bedroom.

Below, Lord Shirogane detailed his plot to catch the rebel, assigning the soldiers to groups in which they would depart to their particular sector of the surrounding area, as depicted on the approximate map of the land that lay in the center of the table they stood around. The soldiers listened intently, lust for the hunt riling them even though they had been told to return the thief whole and alive, so that the border lords could convene and hang him as they watched.

Above, the thief in question was naked in the bed of Lord Shirogane's son, entirely unconcerned with the impending manhunt.

And why would he be? There was nothing to be concerned about, because no one would come looking for him in the heart of his enemies' home. Even Shiro's absence from the manhunt would be brushed aside, because rumor had it he was busy trying to woo some elusive young maiden, beautiful enough to distract him from the exploits of a thief. Why else would he have been asking the gardeners for bouquets and taking wine and food to his quarters in the evening?

Shiro supposed 'courting' was a bit too soft a word for what he and Matthew were doing. It typically implied strolling the gardens hand and hand, chastely gazing at each other across a feast hall, holding each other's gloved hands with a gentleness that could not be converted into any real touch.

At the very least, he was certain that the innocent sort of wooing the gossipers were imagining did not involve Shiro spreading his legs for a fugitive who was currently very occupied with sucking his cock.

Shiro shoved a hand over his mouth to muffle his moaning, although he didn't think he would be heard over the commotion downstairs. Matthew stared up at him, eyes burning, and redoubled his efforts to make Shiro let loose some kind of noise. He got his wish, as Shiro squirmed, toes curling, grasping at the sheets to keep from taking hold of Matthew's hair.

Perhaps things would have been easier if it was simply Matthew's mouth driving him mad with lust. But no, Matthew also had two fingers pressing into Shiro, expertly driving into his body at a pace that had Shiro slowly losing his mind. Thank god Shiro had remembered to refill the bottle of oil he kept in his bedside table.

This wasn't the first time they'd gotten to know each other in the intimate sense. The first time had been a bit sweeter, fumbling and somewhat awkward as they curled together on the couch. The bottle of wine they had just finished was a contributing factor to the evening's activities, as well.

After that, Shiro had discovered he was remarkably easy to get into bed, as soon as Matthew provided a salacious enough grin or traced his fingertips too high up Shiro's thigh. Shiro took Matthew to bed often enough that he knew Matthew's patterns, knew what kinds of touches meant Matthew wanted to get Shiro's clothes off, and what kinds of touches meant Matthew wanted to get Shiro's clothes off *immediately*. Matthew never stayed long after, because once the sun rose, there would be guards stationed around the walls of the keep, and it would be much too difficult for him to sneak out of Shiro's bedroom window.

Matthew's tongue was a wicked thing, whether he was using it to spin a turn of phrase or to lick at the head of Shiro's cock and make him whine

into the pillows. Perhaps it was especially wicked then. His fingers were dangerous as well, and not just because of the way he held a knife. Matthew's talented hands could play his body like an instrument—though Matthew could not actually play any instrument at all. He still managed to work whatever sounds he liked out of Shiro, and at increasingly varying pitches. He could potentially be an accomplished musician.

He was certainly an accomplished lover.

The soldiers were roaring from the room underneath them, but Shiro barely heard it over the blood rushing in his own ears as Matthew finally entered him. Now, Shiro did grip Matthew's hair, winding his fingers in it as he pulled him closer, laying greedy kisses against his lips. Matthew responded in kind, fingers digging into Shiro's pectorals as he started to move, one hand reaching to steady Shiro's thigh, to hold him so his legs framed Matthew's waist.

Although Matthew was a slight man, he was remarkably strong, enough to hold Shiro steady while he fucked him, and also enough to match him in a fight. Shiro didn't think that notion should stoke the fire in him that it did, but he couldn't deny it—he would like to be pinned to a wall by Matthew again. Preferably without a knife at his throat this time.

Shiro was just as breathless now as he had been when Matthew had pinned him in the hall; if he closed his eyes, Matthew's teeth against his neck, worrying red marks, felt not unlike the biting edge of a dagger. It didn't frighten him, simply made him curl his hand around the back of Matthew's neck to pull him closer.

Matthew took him hard, faster than usual, the sound of the din below them spurring him on. Shiro knew a thing or two about Matthew by now, and one of them was that he was eternally fond of doing things he wasn't supposed to do. Especially in bed. It brought Matthew a special kind of joy to know that he was doing exactly what the self-righteous soldiers hunting for him feared he would do most. They painted Matthew as a devious scoundrel who would invade one's home, steal one's coin, seduce one's daughter—although, Shiro knew that last bit wasn't entirely correct. Matthew wouldn't

seduce anyone's daughter. He would gladly seduce a certain lord's son, however.

Matthew's cock struck him in a particular way that made Shiro tip his head back and moan aloud, and Matthew shifted so he could do it again.

"Hush, they'll hear you downstairs," he said, quieting Shiro with a kiss for just a moment.

"You'd like that, wouldn't you?" Shiro's hands scrabbled on Matthew's shoulders, knowing there was no way to pull him closer but wanting to anyway.

"Oh, dear heart," Matthew said, his lips running over the marks he'd left on Shiro's neck, below where his shirt collar would fall, "I'd let the entire kingdom know you're mine if I could. Shout it from the rooftops. But that would leave me open to archers, so I must tell it to you, alone."

"There is..." Shiro paused, because his mind had difficulty grasping for words whenever Matthew was inside of him, "there is a part of you that likes the secrecy, isn't there?"

"Of course. There's a part of you that likes it as well, I'd guess." Another round of shouting and jeering from the soldiers downstairs began, but Matthew looked as though he didn't hear this one, his eyes focused on Shiro's, instead. "Although, I wouldn't mind if they heard you. Let them think you're bedding some nameless maiden, give us an excuse to run away for an evening or so."

Shiro blushed, embarrassment curling through him at the thought of his father's soldiers hearing him make such helplessly aroused noises. The idea of running away with Matthew, though... that was a thought.

"Are you going to steal me instead of gold, now?"

"That's an idea." Matthew gathered Shiro up in his arms like he was about to spirit him away, although Shiro didn't think Matthew could carry him for

more than a few paces, no matter how strong he was. "I'll run off with you, take you back to my lair, have you all to myself—"

"I know you don't have a lair."

Matthew laughed, pecking him on the mouth with a kiss that was surprisingly chaste, considering the fact that he was still very involved in fucking Shiro. "You're..." he began, "you're so. Mm."

"I'm what?"

Matthew's eyes on him were starting to look hazy, unfocused, and he did not bother with answering Shiro's question. "Kiss me again," he urged instead, and as Shiro did, there was one final roar from the soldiers below before the clatter of them rushing out of the hall, off to hunt down a thief who was too busy using Shiro's body to bring himself to climax to worry about a few dozen soldiers and an enraged lord.

Shiro himself was too busy savoring the feeling of Matthew's cock spilling into him to worry, either.

They lay still for a moment, and then Matthew's hand started moving, sneaking between Shiro's legs to fill the place his cock had been with his fingers instead, crooking them into him while his opposite hand stroked Shiro to completion. It felt incredible, for the all of thirty seconds it lasted, and Shiro decided he was going to have to ask Matthew to do that to him again at a point when he would last more than half a minute.

The keep settled into silence while the two of them settled into each other. Shiro relaxed with Matthew still lying atop him, kissing him over and over again in the aftermath of it all. They curled into each other, and Shiro realized all of a sudden that they had reached a point of their relationship at which he had a preferred way to hold Matthew, a position in which their limbs fit together best and they found the most comfort in each other.

"Stay the night," Shiro urged, even though he knew Matthew would never do such a thing.

"You know I cannot," he said. He sounded mournful, not exasperated with Shiro. One of his hands traced the line of Shiro's jaw where it was beginning to prickle with stubble.

"I know." Shiro sighed. "Stay just a while longer?"

"Of course, darling. I'll stay until you fall asleep," Matthew said, kissing him where his hair was stuck to his forehead with sweat. Both of them were still a mess, but Shiro always found himself extremely tired post-coitus, and so he didn't have the time to suggest that they clean themselves up before he drifted off.

Shiro awoke with all evidence of the night's activities carefully wiped from him. Matthew was nowhere to be seen, but Shiro had expected that. He had never seen the man while the sun was out, much as he wished Matthew would someday fall asleep alongside him and wake the next morning with him, too.

As Shiro reluctantly climbed out of bed and dressed himself, he noticed a bruise blooming on his neck, low enough that it could easily be hidden by his shirt collar. It made his heart skip, though, because it was what remained of last night, and he pressed his fingers to it for a moment before he laced his shirt tight enough to hide the mark.

2. Chapter 2

Summary for the Chapter:

Matthew kidnaps Lord Shirogane's son. Very willingly and sensually.

Notes for the Chapter:

I totally wasn't expecting to finish this today, but i'm doing the good ol' 'work on a fic to procrastinate writing another fic' thingy, soooo HERE IT IS! Featuring: Lance! The MFE squad! Matt in a dress! Blowjobs! Subterfuge! All kinds of stuff.

Shiro knew he had no need to worry for Matthew's safety, because the keep was not full of hungover soldiers or those still drunk on the success of capturing a thief. Rather, the men he saw trudging about the halls looked weary and harried, likely recent recipients of an extensive lecture from Lord Shirogane. Shiro was surprised that he himself had managed to sleep through his father demanding to know why no one had found the thief.

As Shiro rounded a corner to head for the kitchens, he felt a sting in his shoulder from a bite-mark-shaped reminder of why the thief hadn't been caught, and he couldn't keep himself from smiling.

"You look well, Sir," someone observed when Shiro entered the kitchen. There was a cluster of soldiers around a small table crammed into the corner of the kitchen, still in armor but slumped over the table instead of standing at attention. They looked as though they'd been awake the whole night. Shiro probably looked well-rested by comparison.

"I... do I?" he asked, scrounging up whatever leftovers from breakfast he could. The cook liked Shiro, and she left something for him to eat on the rare mornings he slept in. It was nothing special, but it would keep him going until the next meal rolled around.

"Of course he does, he wasn't riding around with us, looking for a man who seems to be non-existent." That was one of the two women, dark-haired and

seated with her feet kicked up on a barrel in a decidedly unladylike fashion.

"Rizavi, don't," said the taller of the men, giving her a halfhearted glare. Shiro did not know this particular group of soldiers, but he had commanded missions himself in the past, and so they, like most of his father's soldiers, knew that while Shiro was interested in academics primarily, he was a formidable warrior and leader. And that he was not someone you griped at.

Rizavi did not seem to have learned this, or else she was too exhausted to care. "No, no, he was busy with that equally invisible woman he's been seeing. Weren't you?"

The other man kicked at her feet under the table, but missed.

"I am not seeing a woman," Shiro said, "nor do I know where that rumor came from. I spent the night studying, as I spend most."

Rizavi sighed. "Well, whatever you were doing, it must have been nice to not be required to go on some insane manhunt all night long."

"I suppose," Shiro said. "I take it there was no success?"

"The rebel thief was not found," said the other woman, a small, slight figure who had nearly blended into the background. "Lord Shirogane has sent riders to nearby keeps to request assistance."

Shiro tried not to look concerned for his lover's safety. A single keep's worth of soldiers, especially one of the smaller border keeps like the one the Shiroganes ruled over, was easy for a man to hide from. The combined effort of the entire border was much more likely to root him out. "Did he?" he asked instead, pressing for more details.

"Yes, sir, to Lord Sendak among others," the smaller woman continued.

To that, Shiro couldn't help but frown. He had met Lord Sendak on a few, equally unpleasant occasions. He was a huge, hulking monster of a man, as cruel as he appeared, and it was rumored that he was going to be made one of King Zarkon's generals soon enough.

"In my experience, Lord Sendak is a dangerous person to have around," Shiro was putting it kindly. Lord Sendak was half-mad. In cases of disobedience, he was more likely to execute one of his men than to simply turn him off, and if he thought he could not spare the man, he would either torture him or put him on the front lines of a battle he was bound to lose. There were things Shiro disliked about the way his father ruled, but at the very least, he had never orchestrated the death of one of his own soldiers.

"If only your father was rational enough to dislike that madman, also," Rizavi said. Both men looked at her in alarm, because she was not in a position to insult a lord, even if Shiro had done so.

Shiro, however, was not as offended by breaches of propriety as his father. "If only," he agreed, and then stole away from the kitchen, wondering how he was to let Matthew know one of the most dangerous men in the kingdom was about to be part of the veritable army chasing him down.

— — —

Matthew had told Shiro how to contact him in case an emergency arose, which was why Shiro rode out to the edge of town, searching for a shop he'd never been to, because there had never been an emergency before. Matthew had befriended one of the owners' sons and apparently had the boy running messages for him, now.

Shiro certainly stood out in the packed-dirt city streets here, dressed simply, but finely enough that it was clear he had not come from this part of town. His horse was a dead giveaway, as well—no one in this district would be able to afford a coal-black warhorse, and so it certainly got him some confused stares from passerby. He wished he'd had the time to walk down here, but delivering his message to Matthew was more important than avoiding the discomfort of a few stares from onlookers.

He found the little tailor's shop on the street corner Matthew had instructed him to look for, and he flagged down a young woman walking out of the shop, pausing only to take a breath, because he'd spent most of this ride at full gallop and the rest of it panicking about what would become of

Matthew. "Excuse me," he said, "miss, I'm looking for a gentleman by the name of Lance McClain. I was told he could be found here...?"

Her eyes were wide and round as he began addressing her, but she began to look less impressed the longer he went on. "Oh, Lance lives here," she said, tossing her long brown hair over one shoulder, "but he's no gentleman."

Shiro gave her a quizzical look, unable to form a sentence because he was not sure what this had to do with him finding a way to tell Matthew the most dangerous soldiers in the kingdom were about to be breathing down his neck.

"He's just my little brother," she said, which meant his confused expression had been enough, "but I'll go fetch him for you."

For a moment, she disappeared inside, and Shiro attempted to collect himself. He found it difficult to do so. He was overcome by worry.

After a moment, a man who couldn't have been more than nineteen left the storefront, scanning the street corner for a second before his eyes caught on Shiro standing there. "Come with me," he said, and Shiro paused, loath to leave his horse unattended in this part of town. "It's fine, it's fine, my sister will watch him," the boy said, waving away Shiro's unspoken worry as he gestured once more for him to follow. True to his words, his sister emerged once more from the building and took the lead of Shiro's horse from him, so that he could follow Lance down the road a ways.

They ended up in an empty alley that looked unpleasant and smelled equally so, but provided cover from prying eyes and eavesdroppers.

Lance peered around to make sure they were truly alone, and then he ruffled his messy mop of hair with one hand and sighed heavily at Shiro. "You're Matt's man, aren't you?"

"I... I suppose I am," he said.

"Yeah, yeah, I know you are. He goes on about you so much I'd've known without you opening your mouth at all. Had to listen to him talk for a full

twenty minutes about your eyes, and your face, and your hands, and whatever else. Thank god our rendezvous showed up before he could get to the intimate regions." Lance spoke with his hands, and the gesture that accompanied 'intimate regions' was very impolite.

Shiro had been in the company of soldiers before, knew how crass they could be, but those comments were not usually directed toward Shiro. He realized he was staring at Lance with his mouth open, which was not very polite either, but was certainly a lesser offense than referencing anyone's genitalia.

Lance did not seem to mind Shiro's silence, because he continued as though Shiro's response had been appropriate. "I told him he shouldn't send you out here," he said, "you stick out like a sore thumb. The whole damn block is going to be talking about it, look, a nobleman decided to grace our shitty corner of town. Shit. What're you here for, anyway?"

He retrieved his sense of urgency. "I'm here because Matthew is in danger," he said.

"Matt's always in danger, your Lordship, that's kind of his occupation." That wasn't Shiro's title, but it mattered little anyways, because Lance was not saying it with any sort of respect, and so he probably would not care to use Shiro's actual title for any reason other than that it was shorter.

Shiro shook his head. "No, this is different," he said. "Lord Shirogane is done with reaching out to local barons and the like. He's sent for the most powerful men he knows, to find Matthew, and to kill him."

"It may surprise you, but Matt's gotten into it with more powerful men than your father already." Lance was examining his nails with the air of someone who couldn't be trifled with a soft nobleman's petty worries.

And Shiro could not have that. He drew himself to his full height, stepping closer so that he could properly loom over Lance, speaking in the kind of way that he utilized to command soldiers on the battlefield. "This is no small concern," he said. "Lord Sendak is on his way. He is bringing with him the most powerful warriors in Zarkon's kingdom, all for one man. This

is unprecedented, and Matthew needs to... needs to go, to run before they catch him."

Lance looked sufficiently cowed, but he still managed a bit of a sarcastic grumble when he informed Shiro, "Matt doesn't exactly run from his problems. I suppose I may be able to convince him to return to his family's estate until everything blows over, but it's equally likely that he will refuse."

"Estate?" Shiro did not know much about Matthew's family, only that he had a younger sister named Katherine, who most people called Katie and who Matthew called Pidge. He'd mentioned his parents once or twice, but Shiro did not know who they were.

"Yeah?" Lance looked surprised. "You know Matt does this whole thing because he comes from nobility—or, at least as close as you can get to it, and he believes he knows better than the other noblemen. And he does, usually."

"Where is he from?" Shiro asked.

"Here, technically," Lance said. "He's a Holt."

— — —

Shiro's preferred area of study was the sciences, especially astronomy, but he was not lacking in knowledge of history, or at least in knowledge of where to find historical information. That was why he spent the afternoon in his family's library, searching for any mention of the Holts in the record books. He knew the basics, although it had happened when he was very young. Samuel Holt, who must have been Matthew's father, used to be one of Lord Shirogane's advisors, alongside Iverson and Sanda, who remained in the keep. When Shiro was no more than ten years of age, there had been a falling-out, and he knew that Samuel Holt had been branded a traitor and driven out of the keep and the kingdom.

At the time of the falling-out, Shiro had been proud to see his father stand up for his keep and his people. Now, he was not so certain that had been what his father was doing.

There was precious little information left from the incident, but Shiro did manage to find a journal that had escaped whatever culling of the historical texts he surmised his father had orchestrated. It was written by Samuel Holt himself, mostly complicated theories about economics and the way the kingdom was ruled. Shiro did not understand it all, but he gathered that Holt had thought the way the king, and, by extension, his noblemen, were hoarding wealth was damaging the public and allowing for injustices to be committed against the common people without quarter. He presented arguments for alternative economical solutions, but all of those would require the king to give his riches to the poor, and for that, this man must have been shunned and turned away.

In addition, the journal contained secondhand accounts of the horrors that occurred in Zarkon's army, dangerous medical experiments that Queen Honerva was reportedly allowed to conduct upon prisoners and criminals. Shiro knew that Zarkon was a king who ruled with an iron fist, that he had been corrupted by power and had broken alliances with the kingdom of Altea, that he had disowned his only son. He was not the most well-loved ruler, but Shiro would never say this aloud, because Zarkon liked to make examples of those who spoke against him. It seemed this was what had become of the Holts.

However, Matthew still lived, and from the sound of things, so did his father and his mother, although Shiro was unsure how they managed to escape Zarkon's grasp. He did not know where Matthew's family lived now, but it must have been outside Galra borders. He had asked Lance where Matthew's home was, and Lance had responded, with all the seriousness of a man who had no other answer, "the woods." And while Shiro knew Matthew claimed to live in the forest, he doubted the rest of his family had managed to hide an entire estate among the trees.

It made sense. Matthew was the son of a rebel against the Galra, and while his solutions were much less political and much less ethical than his father's, they seemed to be more effective. Shiro had not been to the part of town where Lance's family lived in some time, and he remembered it being a place of much more squalor and suffering. The people his family ruled over were living better lives than they had been, and it was no thanks to

Shiro or his father, who could have easily decided to ensure that his subjects were well-cared-for but ignored them instead.

Shiro had half a mind to retrieve his horse from the stables and ride, in no particular direction, as far away from here as he possibly could, just to distance himself. He knew that no matter how kindly he acted, he would always be associated with his father's cruelty as long as he lived under this roof, until he himself inherited the keep. And at that point, if he tried to do whatever Samuel Holt had been suggesting, he would have the rest of the kingdom against him.

Shiro set the journal on the table beside the couch in his chambers, dropping onto the couch in a helpless collapse, his head lolling back as he stared at the ceiling and wondered how, as one man, he could do anything to fix this.

And then his bedroom window slid open.

Shiro sat bolt upright, staring aghast at the figure of his lover climbing inside the window, wondering if Lance had failed to deliver Shiro's message or if Matthew's ears had instead been deaf to it.

"What the hell are you doing?" he demanded in a hush, and Matthew couldn't even both to look surprised at his reaction. He had known it would upset Shiro if he appeared here, and he had done so anyway. "Lord Sendak —"

"Could not possibly have arrived already." Matthew crossed the room with haste and dropped to his knees on the floor before Shiro, one hand reaching up to brush his cheek. "I had to see you. I don't know how long I'll be able to stay near the city—I couldn't just leave you." The look in his eyes was desperate and earnest, and Shiro realized Matthew had not taken his words lightly. He had taken them with all the severity they deserved and had determined, then, that there was a possibility this would be his last night with Shiro for a long time.

And although Matthew was going to be captured, Shiro felt as though he was the one who was trapped.

Matthew sat on the couch beside him and clung to him with a desperation that served as further evidence of what he feared his fate may be. He held Shiro as though if he did not grab him tight enough, Shiro would disappear in his arms. All the while, Shiro stroked Matthew's hair and his back, did what he could to comfort him.

"I wish there was a way for me to leave with you," he said. "But if I did, my father would only send more soldiers after you."

"Would you?" Matthew asked, his voice suspiciously watery. "You'd really run away with me?" He'd joked about it a dozen times, but it became less and less of a speculation and more of a possibility the closer they became.

"I would do it in a heartbeat, if there was a way that wouldn't get you killed." Shiro kissed the top of Matthew's head, and slowly but surely, Matthew's grip loosened on him. His hold was more gentle, now, his fingers stroking along Shiro's rib cage and his arms.

"If I had a crazy idea, would you listen?"

"Of course."

Matthew leaned away until he could look into Shiro's eyes, the spark of a new, exciting scheme glimmering in his expression. "So. It involves disguise. Some subterfuge. Probably pissing off your father. A fake kidnapping. Sound good?"

"So far," Shiro said, relief flooding him now that Matthew was excitedly planning his next mission instead of holding him like he never would be allowed to again.

Matthew instructed Shiro to fetch him something to write with, and they sat side by side at Shiro's desk, both of them crammed into a chair that was only meant to admit one. "So," Matthew began, "when Lord Sendak arrives, there will no doubt be a feast to welcome him."

"My mother will want to throw an entire damn ball," Shiro groaned, "dancing, music, feasting, all of it. She's not had an occasion since my

graduation."

"Perfect," Matthew said, tearing off a bit of one of the sheets of paper Shiro had given him, jotting down notes that made no sense. It took him a moment to realize Matthew was writing in code, probably a missive to give to his cohorts. "And we know, so far, that none of your father's men have a clue what I look like."

"They seem to believe you look like a demon straight out of hell," Shiro agreed.

"And so if I arrive at this feast, no one will be the wiser. We can use the occasion to wheedle whatever of your dear father's plan we can out of his soldiers, the drunk ones, especially."

"You could not send someone to do this for you?" Shiro asked, his courage straining now that Matthew was suggesting putting himself directly in front of the men who were about to come running after him, swords in hand.

Matthew shook his head. "No, my group's all common folk, none of them would know how to blend in with the noble crowd without some serious training. We don't have time for that. I'll arrive escorting my younger sister, and we will pose as old friends of yours from school. That way, we can move about unbothered by questions as to our position and standing—no one wants to start a conversation with an academic, trust me."

"Are we that boring?"

"Absolutely," Matthew lied, tapping Shiro's nose with the end of the pencil he wrote with. "And so, in front of your father, I am to invite your back to my home in the capital, near the academy, and you, of course, will agree. My sister will be there because your mother obviously wants you to become close with any young lady in the general vicinity. And so, we will all leave the keep with a smile and with your parents' blessing."

"Isn't your sister a good deal younger than me?"

"Oh, a decade, at least," Matthew said. "But do you honestly believe your parents care about that?"

Shiro's own mother was about a decade younger than his father, anyway. "You have a point."

Matthew cleared his throat and continued. "So. We leave the keep, everyone wishes us well, and then the following day, your father receives notice that his son has been kidnapped by the rebel thief on his way to the capital. They will leave behind no trace, of course, because we will not head for the capital. Instead, we detour to the south, to Altea."

"Will I be allowed past the border?" Shiro said, dubiously. "I am the son of a Galran lord."

"And you will be hand in hand with the son of an Altean commander."

Shiro spluttered for a moment, which made Matthew's hand skip on the page and smudge a word. "Your father is a *commander*? For King Alfor?"

"Yes," Matthew said. "Although his specialty is economics, it seems a good strategist is necessary for fighting the Galra. King Alfor welcomed his talents, although, of course, their chief strategist is Queen Melenor." He was writing as he spoke, because he knew the code so well he did not have to concentrate to translate his thoughts. He had explained the code to Shiro once, saying it was based in mathematics, but because the two of them had been lying in bed and loath to get up so that Matthew could retrieve some paper to demonstrate, Shiro had never seen him write with it until now.

"Go back to the kidnapping bit," Shiro said, and Matthew placed a hand on his chin, smudging graphite into his skin.

"The note will call for a ransom and for it to be delivered by Lord Sendak's contingent of men. And they will walk directly into a trap." He signed the page with a complicated symbol that Shiro recognized as one of the characters of the Altean language.

"You mean to kill him?"

"I will not. Three dozen Altean soldiers will. Trust me, King Alfor will welcome this. Zarkon's strongest general served up on a platter? The Alteans will greet you with open arms if you can give them this, Shiro."

Shiro reached out and scrubbed ineffectually at the smudge on Matthew's chin, a frown etching its way onto his face. "Then I would be a traitor to my people. My mother and father... everyone I have ever known."

Matthew stood from his lap, looking between the plan he'd written out and Shiro. "I... I understand. I work in service to a king I believe is good and just, and I believe... even if he were not, turning away would be, well. Difficult. My father did so, long ago, and it must have been for him, even if I was too young to remember, and—"

"Matthew?"

He paused, chewing on his lower lip. "I realize I am asking too great a sacrifice."

"You are not," Shiro replied. "It is a great sacrifice, true. But it is worth it."

"It is." Matthew's eyes burned with the kind of spirit Shiro had noticed within him the first night they had met. "The closer we get to King Zarkon, the closer we get to saving the Galra people from his tyranny."

Shiro stood as well, close enough that his chest pressed against Matthew's. "That is true," he said, brushing Matthew's wild hair out of his face, "but it is not why I have agreed to such a thing."

"Then why?" Matthew asked, although the answer appeared to be forming in his mind.

"Because I love you," Shiro said, and kissed him.

— — —

As the feast drew closer, Shiro's anxiety was palpable. His father clapped him on the shoulder and suggested that perhaps he was so nervous because there was a young lady who would be at the feast, and Shiro let him keep

his assumptions. It would only benefit them in the end. He could hardly look his father in the eyes, though, because every time, all he could think was, *I am going to betray you tonight.*

The decadence of the feast—from the velvet curtains hanging across the hall to the food and drink laden onto every available surface, to the silver and cutlery and the richness of the clothing he was supposed to dress in—only made him more certain of his decision. He knew that beyond the walls of the keep there were people barely scraping by, and he knew that half of this food would be wasted, though the wine and the mead would be drunk in excess. The nobles and the higher-ups that feasted here tonight would return to their beds happy and full, minds blissfully free of the fate of those they were supposed to be leading.

Shiro dressed entirely in black, more simply than he ought to for such an occasion, but his most formal boots would be painful for the night of riding they had ahead of them. His mother told him he looked as though he would be attending a funeral, but he did not bother with a change of costume.

He nearly did not recognize Matthew when he arrived.

It was partly because Matthew's hair was undone from its usual ponytail and looked like it had been brushed sometime in the past few hours. It fell over the left side of his face and made the scar on his cheek less noticeable, and it may have actually been curled.

It was also partly because of the dress.

This had not been part of the plan, but here he was, standing before Shiro in a forest-green, floor-length gown, looking for all the world like one of the noble ladies of the court. The gown was a shimmering, moss-green velvet, with a high collar to disguise the fact that Matthew was most certainly man-shaped. He must have padded the bust with something. The dress had sleeves that were almost as long as its train, lined with soft fur to keep out the chill, and a pair of gloves hid his roughened hands. Brilliant emeralds glimmered at his ears, and Shiro could have sworn his lips were painted—although perhaps they had always been that red. The entire ensemble

looked like it cost a fortune. Shiro was almost certain Matthew had lifted it from some noblewoman.

He was still staring, agape, when Matthew extended a hand toward him. Shiro, suddenly remembering his manners, bowed low and kissed Matthew's knuckles, then drew him in close enough to speak into his ear.

"This wasn't the plan," he said.

"I'm well aware," Matthew replied. "My sister told me if I tried to bring her to an event such as this one, where she would have to wear a dress and pretend to flirt with a nobleman the entire night, she would stab me in the eye. And I believe her."

"So... this was your alternative?" Shiro offered his arm to Matthew, as was proper when one was escorting a lady. He wasn't sure what was proper when one was escorting a man dressed as a lady, however.

"Yes." Matthew took his arm, delicately, walking aside him in a graceful manner that would have any onlooker believing he truly was a young woman. "I am a master of disguise."

"It is certainly... impressive."

"Do you not think I look beautiful?" Matthew asked, teasing him.

Although Matthew was dressed in women's clothing, Shiro was so used to his appearance that he noticed things like the sharp line of Matthew's jaw, the thickness to his brows, the kind of things that would give him away as a man to anyone who was well-attuned enough. Shiro doubted anyone at this party would be. Matthew was pitching his voice a bit higher, still low for a woman but convincing enough, and he had shaved closer than usual.

"I am not attracted to women," Shiro replied, "but I know that you are not one. So yes, I think you look beautiful."

Matthew fluttered his lashes and Shiro's sharp inhale turned into a cough, as he turned away, his cheeks coloring. Matthew truly had no idea what he was

doing to Shiro. "Well, then, it's a good thing you will be escorting me tonight," Matthew said, "because I think some of the other gentlemen here agree with you."

Shiro had been so focused on Matthew that he hadn't observed anyone else's reactions, but Matthew was certainly getting some looks from other men attending the ball. Of course he was, he was a gorgeous and mysterious lady none of them knew, and they'd be tripping over themselves trying to woo him if he was not on Shiro's arm. Shiro pulled Matthew closer, lifting his chin with an expression defiant enough to make the other men avert their eyes.

Matthew pressed himself closer to Shiro, inclining his head adoringly toward him, laughing brightly like the sudden cloud of jealousy on Shiro's face was the funniest joke he'd heard all week. The jealousy floated away from him and seemed to settle on the other men watching, as Matthew playfully flicked Shiro's chin.

Shiro would be happy to continue joking with him, enjoying the party as a young man with a gorgeous date ought to, but they were approached with a sharp, "well, Takashi, are you going to introduce us?"

His mother. He should have known she'd heard the rumors that Shiro was seeing a young woman, and that she would be furious that he did not tell her he was courting someone.

And he was left there with his mouth open, because he couldn't very well introduce his date as 'Matthew,' could he?

Thankfully, Matthew spoke for himself. "My name is Madelena, my Lady, I'm an old friend of your son's from school."

He had chosen a rather extravagant and lovely name for himself, which Shiro approved of, because he was impersonating a rather extravagant and lovely woman.

"Have you been in town long?" his mother asked, which was code for *how long has this been going on under my nose?*

"Not long," Matthew said, "a few weeks, at most. My father came South when Lord Shirogane called for additional assistance with this whole thief business." The few weeks would have put Matthew's arrival just after Lord Shirogane began putting together the cadre for the manhunt. If Matthew's fictional family had been swift, they would have made it to the keep in that time.

"Yes, I do not care for this... business, as you put it," his mother said. "However, if it has brought my son someone he enjoys spending time with, I suppose there is some good in it." She had no idea how directly Shiro's lover was connected with the manhunt.

His mother let them be, and Shiro realized belatedly that Matthew was clinging to his arm with much more tension than need be in his grip.

"Alright?" he asked, and Matthew released him from the vice grip.

"Yes, I'm fine. She's scarier than your father."

"She's angry at the prospect that I've been courting a lady she hasn't met." Shiro led Matthew to a seat at the high table, where he and his family would be dining, along with Lord Sendak and the highest-ranking soldiers he had brought with him, a pair of men called Thace and Ulaz. Surprisingly, they greeted Matthew as though they knew him, called him by his assumed name without him needing to introduce himself. Shiro found it entirely suspicious, but it did make Matthew's presence among the men in Sendak's company much more believable.

They also sat with his father's chief advisors, Sanda and Iverson, and Shiro was gripped with worry, because he remembered that Matthew's father had worked alongside them, once. Now, Matthew would have been approaching seven years of age at that time, and he looked much older and also like a woman, now, but Shiro couldn't help but worry. Thankfully, everyone seemed to chalk his anxiety up to him finally introducing his new romantic partner to his family and his father's best warriors and strategists.

Matthew was perfectly at home, easily fabricating details about his trip South, their time at school together, anything anybody thought to ask him.

All the while, he sat so close to Shiro he was nearly in his lap. He stole food from Shiro's plate, grasped his shoulder or his knee whenever he got excited by the conversation, and looked for all the world like a lovestruck young maiden. And Shiro, staring flustered and adoringly back at him, probably resembled an equally lovestruck young man.

And so, despite the raucous laughter and ribald commentary as Matthew announced they were going for a walk in the gardens, no one seemed to mind. His father had eagerly given Shiro permission to return to Matthew's—*Madelena's* family estate, and Matthew had played the part so well, they were undisturbed by anyone as they left the feast, hand in hand.

Rather than heading straight toward the gardens, Matthew steered them left, so that they arrived at a little alcove near the southern entrance of the keep. It was a small, curtained-off area, with a couch for lords and ladies to rest upon as they waited for their carriages to be prepared as they departed the keep. It was the perfect place for them to lie low for a while until everyone was drunk enough to not notice them leaving the party early, or else already asleep in their beds.

It turned out, this was also the perfect place for Matthew to pull Shiro into his arms and kiss him.

Shiro couldn't help but recoil out of shock, a yelp escaping his throat before he realized that in order to be covert, they should probably stay quiet. "*What are you doing?*" he hissed, at a much more appropriate volume, and Matthew just laughed and threw himself more fully into Shiro's arms.

"We've got some time while we wait for the all-clear from Thace and Ulaz," Matthew said. Shiro took note that the two soldiers were apparently on their side, but Matthew didn't seem to want to talk strategy. He'd latched himself onto Shiro's neck instead, smearing his lipstick everywhere, fingers nimbly undoing his collar so that Matthew had more access to bare skin.

"Matthew, this is really—"

"Shh." Matthew placed one finger over Shiro's lips, effectively hushing him. "No one is expecting us right now. And this is... honestly, don't you

want a few minutes to be alone together? To stop thinking about the plotting and the danger and... maybe it's too reckless."

Shiro's hands fit to Matthew's waist, which felt slimmer when he was wearing velvet that clung to him so tightly it was like a second skin. "I think you're a connoisseur of just the right amount of recklessness."

Matthew's answering grin was wide and sharp, and so unlike the demure face he'd put on for the banquet it startled Shiro for a moment, giving Matthew enough time to lean in and kiss him again, hauling him in with a strength Shiro had mistakenly forgotten Matthew possessed. He steered the two of them back until they were tucked more fully into the alcove room, so that if someone entered the door, they would have perhaps one or two more seconds before that person caught them in the act.

In the act of what, exactly, Shiro did not know, because Matthew seemed to have something planned, but he was busy kissing Shiro instead of talking. He hadn't moved to undo any more of their clothing, but he had stepped out of his shoes. He'd worn his usual boots, because no one would see his feet beneath the long hem of the dress, but instead of having pants tucked into them, his legs beneath were bare. Shiro caught a flash of pale skin before Matthew's legs disappeared below the hem of the dress again.

"I was thinking," Matthew said, as he maneuvered them so that Shiro was pressing Matthew against the wall, "that you could nearly hide an entire person under a skirt this large."

You probably could not, but Shiro's mother had some skirts that were actually large enough to do so. Matthew did not seem to care that his estimation of what he could hide in his skirt was inaccurate. He lifted one leg, wrapping it around Shiro's thighs, and guided Shiro's hand up underneath the skirt, creeping up the length of Matthew's calf, and then his knee, and then his thigh.

Shiro realized Matthew had not worn anything at all beneath this dress.

"Where did you even get this thing?" he asked, the hand that was not currently gripping Matthew's thigh pulling at the laces of the dress to loosen

the bodice. Matthew stopped him and lifted the other side of the skirt instead, urging Shiro to touch him with both hands.

"Stole it, what did you think?" Matthew asked, as he stripped off his gloves and dropped them to the floor.

"That was about what I was suspecting," Shiro admitted. He paused, his hand meeting some resistance as he touched Matthew's left thigh. There was something strapped to his leg, and it only took Shiro a few seconds of groping about to realize it was a dagger. A slim knife, only about as long as Shiro's palm, but he felt a little better knowing that Matthew had come armed.

Matthew made a little noise of frustration. "That isn't the one you're supposed to be touching," he said, shifting his hips so that Shiro's fingers rested on his cock instead of on the sheathed blade. It was longer than the dagger. Shiro stroked him slowly, crowding Matthew further against the wall as he touched him, and Matthew tipped his head back and moaned.

Matthew put a hand on Shiro's shoulder and urged him downward, until Shiro was kneeling on the ground before him, and he immediately realized what Matthew wanted.

He lifted the hem of Matthew's skirt, not to bare his skin, but just enough that Shiro could duck beneath it, until he was shrouded in a curtain of thick velvet. It was pitch-black but Matthew's leg was right in front of Shiro's face and so he tilted his head to lay kisses up the inside of his thigh. Shiro reached the strap that secured the dagger to Matthew's thigh and he fumbled for the clasp of it. Even if the dagger was sheathed, he didn't need the hilt digging into his chin while he sucked Matthew's cock.

The dagger clattered to the floor and Matthew leaned more heavily against the wall so that he could throw one leg over Shiro's shoulder, letting Shiro do the work of holding him up. That was alright with him, mostly because he could already hear Matthew moaning above him and he'd just barely sucked the head of his cock past his lips.

Matthew was loud, shameless, and Shiro was also loud and shameless, but he at least had the benefit of his noises being muffled by the curtain of velvet around him. He was glad for it, because the sloppy noises of his mouth on Matthew's cock would be considerably embarrassing even if there was no one around to hear it but Matthew.

If they were caught, Shiro realized, their plan would be well and truly ruined, because Matthew's moaning was deep and resonant and distinctly masculine. The way he'd pitched his voice during the banquet could plausibly have belonged to a woman with a very deep voice, but this...

The way he sounded now had Shiro so hard in his pants it started to hurt.

He paused, letting Matthew's cock slip from his mouth, fingers curling around the place his lips had been to give Matthew some relief while he fumbled to undo his pants with his free hand. He'd never had an encounter with Matthew that felt so rushed, so harried, a combination of thrill and panic running through him whenever he remembered their circumstances.

It wasn't that Shiro wanted this moment to be over with. He simply thought that if he didn't speed things up, the danger of it all would increase by the minute. And Shiro also knew that the most effective way to speed things up in this case was to focus all of his attention on the area just below the head of Matthew's cock, where he was most sensitive. He could feel Matthew's hands on him through the fabric of the skirt draped over his head and shoulders, Matthew's gloved fingers fisting in the velvet instead of in Shiro's hair. That was a good sign, as was the increase in the pitch of his voice as he got closer, little pleading sounds and cries of Shiro's name.

Matthew came so hard his head smacked back against the wall, and Shiro would have asked him if he was alright, were his mouth otherwise occupied. Matthew must have been fine, though, because Shiro barely got a chance to swallow before Matthew yanked the skirt out of the way, tugging Shiro up to kiss him, heedless of his sweaty, flushed face or his hair askew or his mouth still full of the taste of Matthew's come.

"That was," Matthew said, between kisses, "exactly what I wanted to happen when I put that dress on."

"Glad I could oblige," Shiro replied. He wiped at the corners of his mouth.

"You're much too polite for somebody who's just had a cock in his mouth." Matthew reached for Shiro's open fly, which made Shiro say something much less polite.

Shiro swore again as Matthew began to stroke him, sagging forward and hiding his face in Matthew's shoulder. "Do we... do we even have time for this, my dear?" he asked.

"Would you rather I let you spend the rest of the night—which, I remind you, will take place on horseback—aching like this?" Matthew continued to touch him while he spoke, because he already knew Shiro's answer was 'no.'

It didn't take long for Matthew to finish him off, either, so they managed to finish their encounter uninterrupted. There was even a moment for Shiro to lean boneless against Matthew, shuddering with the aftershocks of it all and with arousal as he watched Matthew neatly lick his fingers clean of Shiro's come. Then, it was just a matter of straightening Shiro's rumpled clothing, lacing back up what needed to be laced up, and of course, Matthew hiking up his skirt to place the dagger back on his thigh. He was pulling his gloves back on and Shiro was trying to wipe smudges of lipstick off of his face when there was a sharp whistle, like a birdcall, from just outside the alcove.

Matthew licked his lips so that he could repeat the sound, and part of Shiro wished the rendezvous had been delayed so that they could make love all over again.

A tall man came around the corner at Matthew's signal, followed by another, slimmer soldier, both dressed in the uniforms of Lord Sendak's command. They inclined their heads to Matthew and Shiro, and as they stepped into the torchlight, Shiro recognized them as Thace and Ulaz, two soldiers who, until today, he had believed to work for Sendak.

Well, he supposed, they did indeed work for Sendak, but were more double agents than anything.

"The horses are ready," said Thace, "we are prepared to depart, if you are."

Matthew looked at Shiro like he was waiting for a last-minute change of heart, but Shiro took his hand, squeezing once before heading outside. He didn't look over his shoulder as he left, just watched the line of Matthew's back as he rode—sidesaddle, because Matthew claimed he did not want to break character, and because riding a horse with nothing under his skirt like that would be extremely uncomfortable.

As they reached the fork in the road that would take them south toward Altea, Matthew hopped off of his horse to dash into the bushes and change into something more appropriate for travel, which left Shiro just the barest moment to look over his shoulder at the keep peeking out from between the mountains looming behind them. He'd spent nearly his entire life there, but he'd never seen it from the south.

"You can turn back, if you need to," Matthew said, softly, from his side. He had returned, looking much more like himself, with the fur cloak Shiro had given him around his shoulders, his hair pulled back and his quiver on his back. "I would be devastated, of course, but I'd understand. Send you pining, coded love letters."

Matthew leaned against him, his head only coming up to Shiro's hip with Shiro astride his horse, and Shiro reached for him, laying a hand on his cheek. "That wouldn't be enough," he said, "I want to be by your side. I want this."

"I love you," Matthew said, and Shiro got the feeling Thace and Ulaz may have been watching them and rolling their eyes. "Let's go home."

Shiro didn't look back again.

Author's Note:

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